

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH MAJOR GENERAL DAVID PERKINS,
DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC EFFECTS, MULTINATIONAL FORCES IRAQ, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM
IRAQ TIME: 10:30 A.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8, 2009

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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (Office of the Secretary of Defense for
Public Affairs): Hello. I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of
Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Wednesday, April 8th, 2009. My name is
Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg, with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for
Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating the call today.

A note to our bloggers on the line. Please remember to clearly state
your name and the organization you're with prior to asking your question.

Today our guest is Major General David Perkins. He's the director of
strategic effects for Multinational Forces Iraq. He will speak or will discuss
about the current situation in Iraq, to include the strategic framework, the
security agreement implementation, as well as responsible drawdown and credible
and legitimate elections. Sir, with that, I'd like to turn it over to you, if
you'd like to start with an opening statement.

GEN. PERKINS: Well, hi. As you said, this is Major General David
Perkins. And I appreciate everyone taking the time to be with us today.

Obviously, one of the big news items around here was the president's
visit yesterday. It was very well received, both by the troops and the
government of Iraq. And it showed the commitment not only on him, personally,
but to our government to continue the efforts over here in Iraq to continue
working with the Iraqi government and the Iraqi security forces to increase
security and really make sure that our withdrawal down from here is done in a
responsible manner and that we don't lose any of the gains that have been so
hard fought and hard won.

And of course it's always a great morale-builder for those troops when
the president shows up and just shows that their efforts are well- appreciated.

And we continue to operate under the security agreement as of 1
January, which means more and more of the security responsibilities are being
passed to the government of Iraq and to the Iraqi security forces. We've
transitioned over 40 bases, areas, facilities, to the Iraqis and continue to
move down toward -- the road, with the immediate timeline being that our combat
forces will be out of the cities by this June. Now, that doesn't mean we won't
operate in the cities, but we will not be basing our combat forces in the
cities.

We, of course, at the request of the Iraqis, will conduct operations generally by, with and through the Iraqis. And we continue to do our assessment as to the capability of the Iraqi security forces as we adjust our forces on the ground and they fill in some of the areas where we leave: What is the security of the situation like? So this is sort of an ongoing process of assessment, then conduct some adjustment, and then the reassessment and readjustment, like that.

So I think with that thought, the best thing is just to sort of open it up for questions, if anybody has any.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. Let's go ahead and start with Greg Grant. Greg, please go ahead.

Q Yes. General, Greg Grant with military.com. I wondered if you could speak a little bit about some of the more high-profile suicide bombings that have happened and just kind of how that plays into your assessment of the general security situation and if you're noticing any trends, if you will.

And, if you could, if you do know who, exactly, that is -- I mean, I'm guessing it's al Qaeda, but if it's a specific Sunni -- is it al Qaeda or is -- or are there -- are there groups from, you know, Saddam Hussein -- holdovers -- or who, if you could specify, please.

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah. In the last couple days, unfortunately, we have had a series of high-profile attacks. As we are taking a look at them, they have all the signature fingerprints of al Qaeda.

They are -- we had one at Kadhimiya shrine today, which is a Shi'a shrine, a number of other ones in Baghdad, and quite a few of them in Sadr City, which you know is a Shi'a-majority area.

So, again, it is al Qaeda in nature. They tend to try to drive a wedge and start ethno-sectarian violence.

The good news is the response has been one of universal condemnation. And you have not had the retribution killings, which a year and a half ago is what would have happened. You would have, you know, one day 40 Shi'a dead and the next day 50 Sunni dead. And you'd have sort of this tit-for-tat which would spiral down into this huge amount of violence. That is not happening, so that is the good news.

We are obviously concerned when we do have these high-profile attacks. So there's a couple things we take a look at. One is, as we said, what is the response to the Iraqi people? And that's really the most important one. If they universally, all ethno-sectarian groups, soundly reject it, then that means al Qaeda has failed in their attempt to start ethno-sectarian violence. They obviously succeed in their attempt just to spread terror and kill innocent people.

The second thing is we take a look at what is the sustained level of attacks. The average number of attacks, the sustained level of violence is down over 90 percent from its height. And we are at about the same level we were in August 2003, which is a relatively much lower level than we have been the last couple of years.

The other thing we take a look at is what is the time between attacks, these high-profile attacks, because that gives us an insight into the capability of al Qaeda to sustain a high tempo of violence. If they can continue to conduct high-profile attacks day after day after day after day, that is cause for concern, because that means they're at least getting passive assistance, if not active assistance, are able to bring in materiel and resources into Iraq.

About a year ago, the average time between high-profile attacks was 1.9 days. And last month, our average was 3.8. So it is doubled, the amount of time between a high-profile attack, which, again, is an indication that it takes them a long time -- or a much longer time to recuperate, build up supplies, build the bombs, et cetera, like that.

So that's what we're focusing on now: Are they going to be able to sustain a high number of attacks? What is going to be the time between these high-profile attacks? And then what is the response of the Iraqi people?

Q In the past, suicide bombers have often been identified as foreigners coming into the country. Is that -- does that still remain the case?

GEN. PERKINS: Well, you know, what we are finding now is we have had a level of success of interdicting foreign fighters as they try to come across the borders. At the height of it, a year ago, we would say between 50 and 60 were coming in a day. Now we see that -- I mean, you have, you know, three or four a week, something like that.

So the rate of the incoming foreign fighters is dramatically cut. So what we see as a result of that is they have to turn inward. And they tend to go after the more vulnerable aspects of society, and therefore, we have seen a dramatic rise in female suicide bombers, unfortunately, for that segment of society. Because many times they are widows; they are a vulnerable aspect of society, so they are easy to -- for the terrorists to prey upon. So we are seeing a higher number of internal suicide bombers that, again, are recruited. The total number is less, but since they're having a hard time getting them from outside, they have to look inside Iraq. And therefore they tend to go after a very vulnerable aspect of society.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Let's go to Jeremy. Jeremy, please go ahead.

Q Yes, good morning, General. My name is Jeremy. I'm with the Institute for the Study of War. And I wanted to ask you: Despite the fact that you're saying that these -- this recent spate of bombings had all the signatures of AQI, I wanted to ask you if there's any reason to believe that some Shi'ite groups may have been behind the bombings, and if not, what this has to do with the ongoing operations in Mosul and if AQI is sort of trickling back down to the Baghdad area.

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah, I mean, it's always a very complex series of interwoven groups and events here in Iraq. We've always said that, for al Qaeda to win, they have to gain Baghdad; to survive, they have to hold on to Mosul. And so we've had a significant amount of success here previously in Baghdad, which has forced them back to Mosul. And that has sort of been their last stronghold, the area where they had any amount of freedom to maneuver.

And of course we, along with the Iraqi security forces, have put a significant amount of pressure up in Mosul, Diyala area, going after some of their sanctuaries, going after some of their supporters. So we keep a close eye on that to make sure it doesn't sort of become a water balloon that you squeeze one point and it comes out another.

Right now we assess this is al Qaeda back. We think it is an attempt for them to try to gain lost ground. They have had a lot of disruption to their networks, and one of their biggest ways for recruitment and for resources is they conduct high-profile attacks. They then videotape them, put them on the extremists' websites. And so these type of attacks are really big recruiting and fundraising events. And so we have seen these last couple of days is ones where they have built up over a long period of time to go out and conduct a very coordinated -- again, another al Qaeda signature-type operation where you have a number -- we had seven attacks two days ago, all coordinated in a short amount of time, all very similar tactics, techniques and procedures, which again are very al Qaeda-like in nature.

So all -- when we sort of do our post-blast forensics, both on the type of material used, the type of initiator used, the type of area that it was done in, it again generally leads back to al Qaeda. We don't discount that there may be some attempt to sort of do copycat bombings, and we're on the lookout for that. And we're always on the lookout for sort of any extremist activity one way or the other. But we're trying to focus on the network capability al Qaeda has, because that is what allows them to conduct sort of these coordinated multiple high-profile attacks.

Q All right. Well, I guess my follow-up question would be, is there any indication as to the origination of these materials that are being used? Do you have any idea where they're coming from? Are they from within Baghdad, or from outside?

GEN. PERKINS: We're still going through the process. As I said, it's sort of the post-blast forensics. Some of them we have found are old artillery munitions, you know, left over from, you know, the Saddam era. All of Iraq at one point was a large ammo dump, so we've seen a lot of just artillery shells, some homemade explosives. So right now, it looks like a lot of the material used is probably available here in Iraq from previous regime times.

Q Thank you, General.

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, let's go to Jarred. Jarred, please go ahead.

Q Yes, sir. Here in the States, the media, you know, constantly focuses on the potential challenges and weaknesses of the situation. So lately, in these last few days, it has been instances of the government competing against the former Sawa, or Sons of Iraq program, or different Sunni parties clashing with mainstream Shi'a parties. Talk a little bit about what's been going on on the ground as far as, I guess, the ability of the parties to work together following the elections, and what's happening on the ground in these last few weeks.

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah, I'll talk about the Sons of Iraq first.

I've been personally heavily involved in that. Then I'll touch on some of the political aspects.

As you know, the government of Iraq still has not passed a budget yet. So they are working through the political challenges with that, the fact that when they initially put the budget forth, oil was \$140 a barrel and now it's \$40 a barrel. And so that dramatic reduction in income obviously has a huge impact, since oil is 95 percent of their budget. And so they're having to adjust that and work through it.

A point, though, to note, I think, is that because of that, there are a number of unpaid bills that the Iraqi government has. But the one thing that they have put together a special procedure for to pay is the Son of Iraq bill.

And last week I spent multiple days personally in the minister of Finance office, sitting down with him, his lawyers and accountants to figure out how they do that. And they had a special meeting, the Council of Ministers, where they all came together and said, "Okay, we have to pay the Sons of Iraq. It's critical for our security. It's critical that we uphold our commitment to them," and put together a fairly elaborate process of transferring money from one ministry to another and then writing checks, because, again, this is a cash-based economy, so they don't have electronic transfer of funds like we do. And it's a very sort of Byzantine accounting process you have to go through. And they have really never done this before, because previous to this the problem was budget execution. They were bringing in more money than they could actually execute through their bureaucracy.

So they had to put together, really, in a couple weeks' time, a unique process to deal specifically with the Sons of Iraq. And they did that, and starting last week, they paid -- have paid the Sons of Iraq. And, in fact, we just had another meeting today on how they're going to go through this process to pay April's bill.

So while they were late in the payments, while they created some frustration out there, they have sort of gone to extraordinary financial and bureaucratic measures to uphold their responsibilities to the Sons of Iraq.

With regards to politics in general, as you know, they completed their provincial elections 31 January; historic in the fact that this -- these were open-list elections, so they could vote for a candidate, you know, not just a party. They have gone through the process of going through those elections. It was done peacefully. They then certified the results. Results were announced, and those were accepted without violence. And now this month, we're going through the process of seating the provincial councils and have started that already.

So we're on the third part of a three-phase process, and so far all of it has gone fairly well. It is the first time they have done this, so it is, again, an emergency democracy, a young democracy doing some very complicated things.

And so we are going to continue to partner with them to make sure that they can continue the road forward.

So a lot of challenges. This is not to -- minimizing the challenges. But the good news is, more and more of these challenges are being taken up in the courts and being taken up in the Council of Representatives, being taken up

in the provincial councils, rather than grabbing an AK-47 and going into the streets, which is the way it was done previously.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Let's see if we have any follow-on questions. Greg - let's go around the horn one more time. Greg?

Q Yeah. Following on your comments about the Sons of Iraq, I've heard a number of people mention -- American military officials mention that they are a little nervous about the declining oil prices and what that does to, you know, revenues for the Iraqi government, and their ability, then, to pay the bills -- if you could just touch on that briefly. And also, has the -- have we stepped in to fill any of that void as far as payments to the Sons of Iraq go?

GEN. PERKINS: I'll answer the second question first. No, we have not stepped in. We are -- we have a standby plan to do that. But -- however, the -- and really, just last month, in March, was the critical month where this sort of came to fruition and the Iraqis stepped up and paid them. And so we did not pay with -- we did not use U.S. funds for the Sons of Iraq that they were supposed to pay.

We're now going through the process to go through the April pay period, and again, we have no plans immediately to sort of augment them with U.S. money. Because, again, we want to build capacity for them. We want them to know this is their responsibility.

As I said, there are innumerable budget challenges out there. There are a number of things that have already been taken out of the budget -- you know, really, quite honestly, very important things. But the one thing that has not been touched, and there has been no discussion of it -- and I have had personal discussions with the Council, with the finance minister and others -- and that is the Sons of Iraq.

So every government official -- and the prime minister even reiterated it yesterday when the president was here: That is a bill they are committed to paying. So we watch it closely. We sort of have some mitigation plans. But our intent is to enable the Iraqis to live up to that commitment.

Q You said that President Obama brought that issue up with Maliki. Is that the case, as far as --

GEN. PERKINS: Well, President Maliki -- or Prime Minister Maliki --

Q Prime Minister.

GEN. PERKINS: -- made a statement to the fact that that is a bill that they are going to pay and have made provisions to do that.

Q Do you know if that was an issue that was discussed between President Obama and --

VICE PRESIDENT BIDEN: I do not know -- I do not know if that came up in private conversation.

All I know, that he in the media made that statement.

Q Okay, thank you.

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, let's go to Jeremy.

Q Yes, sir. Two things. First, I wanted to confirm that you said that the budget was -- or has not yet been passed, because I was under the impression that it was initially vetoed, but it was passed a couple of days after. Is -- am I --

GEN. PERKINS: Well, yeah, here -- don't want to get too much into the bureaucracy. What happened was the budget was passed by the COR, was sent to the council -- or was sent to the Presidency Council, who must sign it, very much like the president has to sign a bill in our --

Q Certainly.

GEN. PERKINS: -- legal system. He -- however, when that went forward, it did not have the tables with each ministry and how much money got paid, et cetera. So it was incomplete. So the Presidency Council returned it to the COR to fill out the tables of everything -- you know, of all the ministries and all that had to be done.

The Council of Representatives subsequently returned the full bill, the complete bill, with, you know, basically the wording as well as all the tables to it. The Presidency Council has signed it, but it is -- but -- and then it must be posted to the gazette before it becomes law. So that final portion of it being posted has not occurred yet, which means you can't start spending on it.

Q I understand. Thank you very much.

And then my second question refers back to SOI payment procedures. And do they fall or have they fallen under MOI, MOD? And do they interact on any level with the Implementation and Follow-Up Committee?

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah. Last year, they were paid for out of the IFCNR fund, implementation and reconciliation committee. And so that's where the money came from. And it was dispersed through them and that's how it got paid. They -- when they got transferred from the coalition forces, they went to the Iraqi army, so the minister of defense, but the money came from IFCNR.

When that money ran out this year and the budget was not passed, IFCNR did not have the funds to do that. So the Council of Ministers had a special meeting. They gave a special authorization for the Ministry of Interior to pay for the bills, because when the budget wasn't passed, they do very much like we do in the U.S. We have a continuing resolution. So the minister of interior was under a continuing resolution where basically they were advanced one-twelfth of last year's budget to them each month until they could pass the budget.

Out of that continuing resolution money, the minister of interior was allowed to take money out of his payment to pay the Sons of Iraq. And then what they did was take that money and then write a check to IFCNR, who then paid them the normal way.

So it was this -- again, sort of this Byzantine process, that the money technically is coming out of the minister of interior, it's under his line, but he is writing basically one big check back to IFCNR, because they did not have a

continuing resolution authority, and then IFCNR would cash the MOI check and then pay the Iraq -- the Sons of Iraq.

Q Okay. Thank you, General.

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, last question goes out to Jarred.

Q All right. Yes, sir. Could you talk a little bit about -- obviously, as we draw down, the Iraqis have to stand up. Could you talk a little bit about the training programs that you're most interested in to making sure that the Iraqis are able to conduct some of the same jobs that you and your troops are doing in the years ahead?

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah, that's really a big part of us being able to get out of here and not lose any of the gains that we've had.

So there's been a -- you know, a training program here since the very early days. Initial focus was on sort of your basic infantry units, your counterterrorism units, things like that. What we are now focusing -- and then we would provide a lot of the enabling forces, I mean, artillery, aviation, reconnaissance, intelligence.

And what we are focusing on now, so that as we continue to withdraw support the Iraqis are self-sustaining, is building up their logistical capability so that they can operate in the field and sustain themselves. We're working very closely so they can develop a reconnaissance capability, develop an intelligence capacity so they can gain intelligence on terrorists and then do some analysis and do targeting off of that.

And then we're also focusing heavily sort of on the professional part of it -- in other words, their non-commissioned officer schools, their officer training -- so they develop a professional non-commissioned officer corps, they develop a professional officer corps that is not politicized, that owes its allegiance to the nation and not a political party, owes its allegiance to a nation and not an ethno-sectarian back -- you know, background.

And so you're not -- we're continuing to focus on some of the basic training and counterterrorism things, but we're putting a new emphasis on enabling training as well as professional training of the leadership.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. With that, sir, I'd like to turn it back over to you, General Perkins, if you'd like to end with a closing thought for today's roundtable.

GEN. PERKINS: Well, again, appreciate you all taking your time here to learn about what's going on in Iraq. It's always a very exciting time over here. As I said, we have had, unfortunately, a couple of high-profile attacks this week. We're watching very closely to see what the frequency of that is, to see what the response of the Iraqis -- how the Iraqis respond to this. The good news is, so far it has not resulted in ethno-sectarian violence.

We continue to have average levels of attacks -- quite low, the same as about August of 2003. We are in the initial stages of seating the new provincial councils that have been recently elected, and so that is the focus. And of course, we are working with the Iraqis as they get ready for their

national elections, which will be held at the end of this year; as well as work through some of the issues that are causing them challenges with budgets, with regards to Sons of Iraq and all that.

But there are a number of challenges, but the Iraqis are working very hard, stepping up to the plate. And we are working through these things day by day. And we take none of this for granted, but we do have sort of some proven models that we're going to continue to use in the future.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir, for attending today's DOD Live Bloggers Roundtable, very much. And again, thank you, for the bloggers that attended.

Just an admin note: Today's program will be available online on DefenseLink on the bloggers' section, along with a transcript, a story about today's call, and the audio.

Again, thank you, sir, for joining today's roundtable, and for the bloggers. This concludes today's event.

GEN. PERKINS: Thank you.

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